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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000770

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, INR/NESA

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05-12-14

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: After recent election defeat, UNP leader Wickremesinghe under fire from within his party

Refs: Colombo 760, and previous

(U) Classified by Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: UNP leader and former prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is under fire from members of his own party who are seeking to clip his wings and/or remove him as party leader. The discontent stems from the view of many party members that Wickremesinghe led the party poorly in the April election in which the UNP was defeated. Despite the heat, Wickremesinghe seems set to hang on as party leader, as there are no clear challengers to his rule at this time. In the mid- to longer term, if the party is to improve its standing, it will have to open up to a new generation of leaders.
END SUMMARY.

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12. (C) The United National Party (UNP) has been roiled by internal dissension since the party lost the April parliamentary election. The dissent is a bit unfocused, but its main aim is to clip the wings of Ranil Wickremesinghe, the UNP and Opposition Leader, and/or remove him as party leader. (Wickremesinghe was prime minister from December 2001 until the UNP's defeat in the April election.) Two main challenges to Wickremesinghe's leadership of the party have emerged recently:

-- In the first challenge, Sajith Premadasa, a UNP MP from Hambantota District in the south, has proposed changes to how the UNP selects its party officers. Premadasa, who is the son of former President Premadasa and a former deputy minister, told poloff on May 12 that he had introduced a proposal in a May 10 UNP parliamentary group meeting that all party officers be elected. (Some press reports state that Premadasa wants a "secret" ballot, but he did not confirm this. Currently, the party leader appoints all the party's officers.) Premadasa also proposed that a committee structure be set up to make policy decisions. Premadasa told poloff he had made these proposals out of "a genuine need for reform within the UNP on several levels," and because he felt the UNP needed "more internal democracy." Although he stressed to poloff that his proposal was not anti-Wickremesinghe in thrust, Premadasa has been known to have had a tense relationship with the former PM for some time. Premadasa said his proposal had been well-received by many party members, though the party leadership had not yet formally weighed in on them as of yet. The UNP was scheduled to have further meetings later this week to review Premadasa's proposals as well as other issues. (In a May 12 meeting with the Ambassador, G.L. Peiris, a former minister, derided Premadasa's proposals, asserting that the party leader had to have authority to make decisions and should not be constrained in doing so by a committee structure.)

-- In the second challenge, UNP party member and Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) chairman Thilanga Sumithapala spearheaded an effort to replace Wickremesinghe as party leader last week. Sumithapala, in making this move, claimed that Wickremesinghe had failed the party and needed to be removed. Nimal Weeraratne, a UNP official, confirmed to Pol FSN on May 12 that Sumithapala had tried to oust Wickremesinghe and asserted that Sumithapala had also attempted to convince several UNP members to cross over and support the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government. According to Weeraratne, members loyal to Wickremesinghe had told the former PM of these machinations and the effort was quashed. (Contacts have told Mission that Sumithapala, currently on bail for his alleged involvement in an immigration scandal, may be forced to resign from his position as SLT chairman shortly.) In fending off Sumithapala's effort, there are unconfirmed reports that

Wickremesinghe had to promise that he would undertake large-scale reform and "restructuring" of the UNP. (Indeed, at the UNP's May 10 meeting, Wickremesinghe had reportedly placed some reform proposals on the table, including the idea of developing "a UNP code of conduct." This latter idea is aimed at stopping corruption and ethical improprieties. Charges of corruption dogged a number of ministers and UNP MPs during the recent election campaign.)

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Party Leader Under Fire

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13. (C) Overall, the discontent within the UNP stems from the view of many party members (and outside observers) that Wickremesinghe led the party poorly in the April election campaign. The sense that Wickremesinghe was a failure has taken various forms, including many press commentary pieces in English- and Sinhala-language newspapers grumbling about his leadership style, which is commonly seen as lackluster to put it mildly. In one such article, which appeared in the English-language ISLAND on April 5, local political analyst Rohan Edirisinha said "the prime minister never really took people into confidence, whether he was dealing with the peace process or the rebels or dealing with the economy."

14. (C) Long-standing UNP members have also criticized Wickremesinghe's election strategy, though mostly in private. In a May 10 meeting with the DCM, for example, former Interior and Christian Affairs Minister John Amaratunga said the UNP had lost the election due in part to a lack of charisma on Wickremesinghe's part. Amaratunga stated: "You have to at least give the impression that you are willing to die for what you stand for." During the May 10 UNP meeting, Amaratunga related that one party member had complained to Wickremesinghe's face that his constituents were unhappy that the former PM never smiles and they wonder why they should vote for the UNP. Amaratunga said Wickremesinghe did not respond, remaining stonefaced. In a conversation with Ambassador on April 8, former minister Milinda Moragoda remarked that Wickremesinghe "did not have the common touch." Moragoda, who is a close adviser to Wickremesinghe, compared him unfavorably with former President J.R. Jayawardene, who ran a series of strong UNP campaigns in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. (One major exception to the mainly quiet nature of complaints about Wickremesinghe by UNP figures was former foreign minister Tyronne Fernando, who went public with his opposition to Wickremesinghe in late April. Fernando's outburst appeared more linked with the UNP's decision not to give him a "national list" seat in Parliament, however, than actual animus toward Wickremesinghe. Fernando has since resigned from the UNP.)

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Despite criticism, no clear alternative

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15. (C) Despite the criticism, Wickremesinghe seems set to hang on as party leader, as there are no clear challengers to his rule at this time. In the May 10 conversation with the DCM noted above, for example, former minister John Amaratunga said that he had recently been in several UNP meetings at which there had been "frank discussions" as to whether Wickremesinghe should be replaced. Amaratunga said the conclusion from the meetings was that Wickremesinghe should not be forced out right away. He also said he felt that former Minister of Power and Energy Karu Jayasuriya -- who some interlocutors have recommended as a possible replacement for Wickremesinghe -- was "not a viable option." Amaratunga noted that he was not impressed with Jayasuriya's organizational and leadership abilities, for example. Party dissidents themselves, such as Premadasa and others, have also failed to name a definitive alternative to Wickremesinghe. In the meantime, in his meeting with the Ambassador, G.L. Peiris indicated that he did not think that efforts to remove Wickremesinghe would go anywhere. He added that reported tensions in the party were "much exaggerated." (According to observers, aside from Jayasuriya, other possible replacements for Wickremesinghe include: Joseph Michael Perera, a senior UNP MP and former Speaker; K. Rambukwella, a senior MP and former minister; and Milinda Moragoda.)

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COMMENT

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16. (C) Wickremesinghe's image has suffered serious damage in recent months. Most particularly, he has

suffered in comparison with longtime rival President Kumaratunga, who is widely seen as dynamic and passionate. That said, Wickremesinghe should be able to weather the storm for now. In the mid- to longer term, if the party is to improve its standing, however, it will have to open up to a new generation of leaders. There is a view that UNP leadership circles have become a bit stuffy and are not open to new blood. Humbled by its recent defeat, the UNP is going to have to adjust to get out of its current political trough or face further defeats down the road. END COMMENT.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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